

# KING FOR EVER

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*"The Lord sat as King at the flood;  
yea, the Lord sitteth King for ever."—THE PSALMIST*

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Is that the trouble? The rust of prayerless days? The atrophy of faith, the dwindling of spiritual zest, the loss of spiritual power? You want the door to open, but it just will not budge—is that it?

Well, listen. We saw already that Christ never breaks down a door, if the owner does not want to have him in. He will not do it against a man's will. But this is quite different. Here is someone who really wants to open the door and finds himself beaten. But is there not a story in the Gospels of a day when Christ came, "the doors being shut," and stood in the midst and said, "Peace be unto you"? Does that not give a sudden hint of how it might happen even now? Long ago in the Elizabethan age the poet-preacher of St. Paul's Cathedral, Dr. John Donne, had envisaged this precise situation, of the door too firmly jammed to move, and he met it with a prayer:

Barter my heart, three person'd God! for, You  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new . . .  
I am betroth'd unto Your enemy,  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to You, imprison-me, for I  
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.

"Barter my heart, three person'd God!" And you can say, if not that, at least something like it. "Lord, here am I. I really want to let you in. But I have so little faith. I have forgotten how to pray. I am such an ordinary, unspiritual creature. I have tried to open the door but, Lord, there is the rust, the accumulated rust of years upon the bolts. You must do it for me. Break through! Smash that rusty lock. Barter my heart, three personed God! And even so—yes, even so—come, Lord Jesus!"

## FACING OUR SKEPTICAL MOODS

*"I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue:  
I will keep my mouth with a bridle . . . Lord, make me to know mine end,  
and the measure of my days, what it is . . .  
And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in Thee . . .  
I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.  
O spare me, that I may recover strength,  
before I go hence, and be no more."  
PSALM 39:1-13*

One effect the fierce strains and stresses of these critical days ought to have is to drive the church and all of us back to the psalms. Right down the centuries, to every succeeding generation the psalmists of Israel have spoken, but never surely did their words ring out across the dark with more commanding relevance than in our own confused and stormy day.

Let this Thirty-Ninth Psalm stand as an example. A word first about its structure. It is a poem in four stanzas, the first three stanzas having three verses each, the final stanza four. You will observe that, as you pass from one stanza to the next, the mood changes. The theme develops. The man's reaction to the terrific pressure of life undergoes an exciting transformation.

I propose that we should travel this journey with him, step by step. And I pray that it may be a real word of the Lord, this psalm, to brace and rally us for our own pilgrimage in these faith-resting days.

Take the first stanza—verses one to three. What is the key-note here? Put it in a word; it is "repression." Here you have the conscious curbing and controlling of the skeptical mood. The man is violently repressing a strong temptation to say

harsh and bitter things about life and providence. You can see him holding back, with a terrific effort, the wild, whirling words that would come pouring to his lips, "I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue. I will keep my mouth with a bridle," I will put a muzzle on my lips.

What was it that had roused the psalmist to such a pitch of feeling? It was the way the world was run. It was the sight of evil things so blatantly and jubilantly successful. "I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the prosperity of the wicked is before me."

In other words, it was the eternal question which still sometimes comes beating down on us with the force of a tornado, *Why does a good God stand it? Why are such devilities tolerated?* Surely it ought to be possible for an omnipotent providence to keep its own house in order!

The psalmist was sorely tempted to give vent to such feelings in an outburst of radical cynicism. He was just on the point of letting himself go in a diatribe of scathing invective which would impeach the government of the universe.

But then suddenly, look, he rams on the brakes and calls a halt. Not a moment too soon, he represses the dangerous mood. "I said to myself, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue." Even if I feel like that, I must not say it in words. I must not let the denunciatory, vituperative mood out into speech. I will keep my mouth with a bridle!

Why did he impose that difficult decision? His own words make it clear. It was the sense that such wild talk was somehow spiritual treason. It was an inner chivalrous instinct telling him that under no circumstances must he say anything which might make things harder for others of God's believing children, many of whom were having a difficult enough time already without his depressing cynicism to make it worse. It was the consciousness that after all he, the psalmist, from his little corner of the world and with his dim finite mind, could see only an infinitesimal fraction of what God was doing, and that therefore for him to presume to impeach the universe would be preposterously naïve and arrogant and absurd. All that entered into

it, when he applied the brake and checked the runaway words. "I will put a muzzle on my mouth!"

Now that example of his is worth pondering. Heaven knows that life is grim and perplexing enough for multitudes today without our indulging in depressing moods to make it harder.

It is best to be quite blunt and frank about this. Any faithless talk about the divine ordering of the universe is treason to the saints.

The man who goes about saying "What a world this is! Just one gigantic muddle. If there is a 'divinity that shapes our ends,' it has botched and bungled the work" that man is doing what no soldier of Christ worthy of the name would ever dream of doing.

It is not only that he is spreading a blight of gloom and dejection when he ought rather to be rallying the courage in the depths of less valiant souls. It is also this—that he is disloyal to the good fight of faith, to all the heroic saints and martyrs who have fought that fight in ages past, and to the whole generation of the children of God who are fighting it today. He is deserting from faith's battlefield. He is setting his own moods and scruples and misgivings against the shining convictions for which Jesus vehemently laid down his life.

And there is still more. For after all, who is he, who is any man, yes, even the most intelligent member of the most brilliant brains trust that any revision syndicate could bring together, to pronounce on the everlasting, inscrutable purposes of almighty God? As high as the heaven is above the earth, so far do God's vast designs outsoar the reach of our poor finite minds. We are no more qualified to comprehend the inner workings of God's purpose than the swallows nesting in the eaves of a church would be qualified to understand the purpose for which the church was built.

Far better, like the psalmist, take an oath of silence, before our agnostic moods and skeptical attitudes have an opportunity to indulge themselves. Better "take heed to our ways, and put a muzzle on our mouth, that we sin not with our tongue."

But now observe what happened here. The psalmist began to

find that his forcible repression of the skeptical mood was not an altogether satisfactory solution.

It never is. It is only a second-best. Indeed, the very act of repressing an emotion may have precisely the opposite effect to what was intended: it may simply drive that emotion down more deeply into the subconscious mind and fix it there more securely.

That is what the psalmist discovered. The muzzle on his mouth merely aggravated the trouble in his heart. "I was dumb," he writes, "with silence. But that only stirred my sorrow. My heart grew hot within me. While I was musing, the fire burned." While I was scrutinizing the problem, the smoldering sparks of my disquiet burst out into a blaze. The strategy of dumb silence, in spite of all his noble efforts, had broken down. Words had to come.

Now here we pass in the psalm from stanza one to stanza two—verses four to six. If the keynote of stanza one was repression, the repressing of the skeptical mood, the keynote here is *resolution*, the resolving of skepticism into prayer—just as in music we speak of the resolution of discords into harmony.

For notice this crucial thing: when this man's dangerous mood refused to be repressed and words had to come, the first words that came were a prayer. "Lord, make me to know my end."

That is the wonderful thing. Not the wild surge and thunder of scathing skepticism that a moment ago had seemed inevitable. Not the mocking, contemptuous laughter at life that would have proclaimed the disillusioned defeatist. No. What the man did with his wild, perilous background of doubt, perplexity, and misgiving was to turn it all into prayer. "Lord make me to know my end."

Is there not a vital principle here for all of us? When you and I are sore about life and perturbed by its grim confusions, don't let us say a word against it, until we have spoken first with God himself. That is the salutary rule. Turn it into prayer!

Too many of our prophets of radical gloom today have never thought of doing that. They go around spreading their vicious

miasma of depression without ever daring to test their case in the secret place of the Most High, saying censorious things about God, behind God's back as it were, which they would never dream of saying to God's face.

Do you think that this psalmist, kneeling there in the presence of the Lord, could have said, "O God, I have come to tell you that I have found you out. Your vaunted gift of life is a cheat. Your world is incorrigible. Your promises derelict and worthless"? Do you think the psalmist, with all his inward doubts and grievances, could have prayed a thought like that? He might have thought it, and he might have said it, but could he have prayed it? The words would have frozen on his lips if he had tried. Well now, listen to this: any thought that will not fashion itself into prayer is a liar and deceiver. Any mood that resists the test of supplication has by that very fact proved its falsehood.

So I repeat that here is a most salutary rule: never a word against God until you have taken it first to God himself, until you have tried to say it looking full into those eyes of God which are Christ's eyes, until you have attempted to thrust your written indictment, your grievance and complaint, into the pierced and bleeding hands of Jesus. You will find you simply cannot do it then. There is no cure of the skeptical mood like the searching test of prayer.

Just watch what happened when the psalmist prayed. He suddenly perceived things in totally different perspective. He saw life steadily and whole, saw his immediate, obsessing problems against the background of eternity. In particular, he saw now the emptiness of the permissive freedom he had almost been inclined to envy, saw the utter hollowness of secularism's loud successes, saw the vanity and instability of glittering ramshackle civilizations that stubbornly flout the laws of the eternal. He sees this down bluntly in verse six: "Surely these men walk in a vain show. They heap up riches, and know not who shall gather them." It is almost a forecast of one of Jesus' most devastating comments on the secular cupidity of an affluent society, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee."

Here we pass in the psalm from stanza two to stanza three—verses seven to nine. If the keynotes of stanzas one and two were repression and resolution—the repressing of the skeptical mood, and the resolving of skepticism into prayer—the keynote here is *realization*: the realizing of the one thing needful.

The psalmist suddenly becomes piercingly aware that in this difficult and desperate world there is after all just one thing which finally matters: to possess God. Look at his words. "And now, Lord, what wait I for?" Why need I wait at all? "My hope is in thee."

This realization, for those who really come awake to it, is the most liberating and illuminating experience in the world. It extricates from disillusionment and despair. "My windows are all darkened," wrote George Macdonald of a troubled period in his life, "all save the sky-light." What the psalmist is telling me is that I don't need to wait till my problems are solved and life's vexed questions settled; as long as I have God, I have everything that matters. I don't need to wait till I can explain the universe or give a satisfactory answer in terms of logic and theory to its baffling enigmas; it is not an explanation nor a theory I am needing; it is a reinforcing Presence and if I have that, I can march on now, without waiting, devoid of fear.

In order to live the victorious life, I don't need to wait till my disabling handicaps are eliminated or the thorn in the flesh removed. In order to run the straight race, I don't need to wait till the road emerges from the rough places and the shadows into the open and the sunshine. Now, today, this very moment—amid the thronging cares and anxieties that beset me—I can go with the step of a conqueror, if I have God at my right hand.

Yes, there is something even greater, namely this—I don't need to wait, when my sinful heart is yearning for the blessedness of being forgiven and ransomed and set free, I don't need to wait until I have done penance for my sins, don't need to wait until the hour seems more propitious and I have fashioned something like a decent character to offer to the Lord. If I have once seen God as he comes to meet me at the cross of Jesus, then I can cry—with far more assurance than any psalmist—"Now,

Lord, what wait I for? What can I possibly wait for after this? My hope, my certainty, are in thee!" I know this is the one thing needful in this dark, stormy world—to possess the living God revealed in Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever.

When the psalmist, having reached his saving realization, goes on to add, I was dumb, I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it," it is a very different kind of silence from the muzzled taciturnity we saw him struggling to achieve in his first stanza. There it was the strained, uneasy silence of forcible repression. But he is far beyond that now. This is the evangelical silence of acceptance of the will of God.

But let there be no misunderstanding. I am not extolling a pious resignation that lies down before the glaring ills of life and weakly tolerates them as if they were inevitable; there is no virtue in that. But I am remembering One greater than the psalmist of whom it stands written, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted; yet he opened not his mouth. As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth." Anyone who suggests there was weakness in that silence does not know what he is talking about. It was the strong silence of entire devotion to the will of God. "I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it."

Do you see what this means for you and me? Surely this. If we can see God's hand in our experience; if, however daunting the road, there shines for us, as there shone for Jesus on the Via Dolorosa, the high conviction "This is the path on which God means my feet to be"; if even dimly and from afar we have caught some glimmer of the meaning of that quiet, amazing saying with which Christ turned to face the cross, "The cup which my Father gives me, shall I not drink it?" then we are on the way to learn the tremendous truth that for those who give their lives over vehemently and heartily to the divine control, saying amen to God's will for them, there can be in this world no irreparable disasters, no deepest ills that cannot yield overwhelming good, no thorns that cannot be woven into a crown.

And this brings us to the end, to the note on which the psalmist closes, in his fourth and final stanza—verses ten to thirteen. We have heard in the earlier stanzas the notes of repression, resolution, realization. Here the note is *recapturing*—the recapturing of the pilgrim spirit.

His words towards the end are like the drumbeat of a pilgrim march. "I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were." Here I have no continuing city. Here I am a resident alien, with a temporary lodging at best, and no sure hold on life, a restless wanderer, never absolutely at home, always journeying on, and knowing full well that, when I die, the world will still be pursuing its accustomed way, quite oblivious that for a brief span I have made my sojourn here.

It speaks volumes for the psalmist's faith that though his knowledge of a future beyond the grave was clouded and uncertain, although he can only end with those most poignant words about "going hence and being no more," he nevertheless casts himself without one shadow of doubt upon the God who sees the end from the beginning. "I am a stranger, an alien and a sojourner, but at least I am a sojourner *with thee*. I am God's pilgrim. And God will call me home!"

The recapturing of the pilgrim spirit—do we not need that today, in this secularized, mechanized age which tends to have no time for the world unseen and the beckoning horizons of eternity, and very little but contempt for the homesickness of the exiled spirit that once induced the apostolic cry "I have a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better"? The temper of the age in a predominantly materialistic society like ours can be terribly tyrannical, imposing its this-worldly standards of success and satisfaction, making totalitarian demands on mind and emotion, hope and desire, and branding all talk of being born again into another dimension of life as pious, fraudulent fantasy. But if Augustine was right when he cried, "O God, thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless till it rests in thee"; if the Bible is right when it says "Thou hast set eternity in their hearts," then the secular utopianism of today is the craziest of philosophies. Yes, and any world view or the-

ology or church which plays down the pilgrim note and tries to domesticate us firmly in this present world is distorting the basic reality of existence and perpetrating a treason on the gospel.

It is precisely the recapturing of the pilgrim spirit which is offered us in Christ. We Christians, far more than any psalmist, can hold with confidence the faith in a world beyond this sphere of sense and time. For in the Word made flesh at Bethlehem we have been given the clue to life and destiny. We have seen the age to come and the dimension of eternity breaking through into our categories of space and time and refashioning history before our eyes. To us there has come, like the sound of ten thousand trumpets, a great Voice crying athwart the ages: "Fear not! I am the first and the last; I am he that liveth, and was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore—the firstborn of a great brotherhood, the resurrection and the life!"

And so, recapturing the pilgrim spirit, we turn to the road again, with Christ's dear voice to cheer us on, his presence to gladden all the way, and his power prevailing not only to bring the exile home but also to make even the castaways and the outlaws of this earth into citizens of heaven.

There was a day when a group of early Christians were being martyred in the Roman colosseum for the faith of Christ. As the shadows of the last agony came down upon them, the warring thousands heard from that arena of death a sudden loud triumphant shout, and it was this, "We have lived and we have loved, and we shall live and we shall love again. Hallelujah!" Valiant faith! Ours be that shining confidence. We have lived and loved. We shall live and love again!

Aliens? Yes. Strangers, sojourners, pilgrims? Yes. But "sojourners," as the psalm says, "*with thee*," with God, the living God who in Christ has brought life and immortality to light, the strength and stay of every pilgrim road, the guarantee of the most wonderful homecoming at the end, when the dim glimpses of eternity which we have on earth are merged into full and perfect vision.

I know that safe with Him remains,  
Protracted by His power,  
What I've committed to His trust,  
Till the decisive hour.

Then, the morning and the King's face, to whom be the glory  
for ever.

## THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION

*"Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,  
that great Shepherd of the sheep,  
through the blood of the everlasting covenant,  
make you perfect in every good work to do His will,  
working in you that which is wellpleasing in His sight,  
through Jesus Christ;  
to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."*  
HEBREWS 13:20, 21

Perfect? in every good work? To do his will? But surely, knowing myself as I do, knowing something of the world in which I have to live, this is a preposterous ideal, an absurd heightening of much more ordinary, pedestrian ambitions. I want something humanly attainable. If I can make even a half-decent showing in the fight for character, if I can be sure of seeing the pilgrimage through without weakness or dishonor, I shall be quite content. That is good enough for me. Perfect? In every good work, to do his will? It is a dream, remote, fantastic, out of reach for ever!

This reaction is understandable. Its logic, humanly speaking, is impeccable. Its healthy humility is commendable.

But before we accept it as final or inevitable, let us have another look at what the apostle is saying. In particular, let us look at the context in which these words about being perfect in every good work are set. He begins with God, and not just with some undefined idea of God, but with God in one particular aspect. He begins with the God of the resurrection. Now this is absolutely vital to his argument. It changes the whole perspective. "The God who brought again from the dead the Lord Jesus, make you perfect."